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ABSTRACT

Every year the New York City foster care system discharges approximately 650 young people between the ages of 18 and 21 to live on their own. This study was conducted to determine how the voluntary foster care agencies in New York City have interpreted state and city independent living regulations and implemented programming and services that lead to self-sufficiency for these young people. Also considered was whether the state and city regulations are adequate to support these young adults. Members of a task force interviewed independent living coordinators at 10 of the 62 voluntary foster care agencies in New York City. Task force members also reviewed the records of youth who had left foster care and conducted a focus group of 15 young people receiving independent living services at 1 foster care agency. Based on study findings, the task force recommends: (1) evaluation of the city's independent living program; (2) permanent housing, employment, health insurance coverage, and graduation from high school for youth who sign themselves out; (3) expansion of the core curriculum of the independent living program to include practical opportunities to find a job and other living skills; (4) funding to strengthen aftercare and follow-up services; (5) requirement of job experience and employment for all youth at the point of discharge; and (6) a permanent home for all youth at the time of discharge. Two appendixes list members of the task force and contain the study questionnaire. (SLD)

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# Can They Make It On Their Own?

## Aging Out Of Foster Care– A Report on New York City's Independent Living Program

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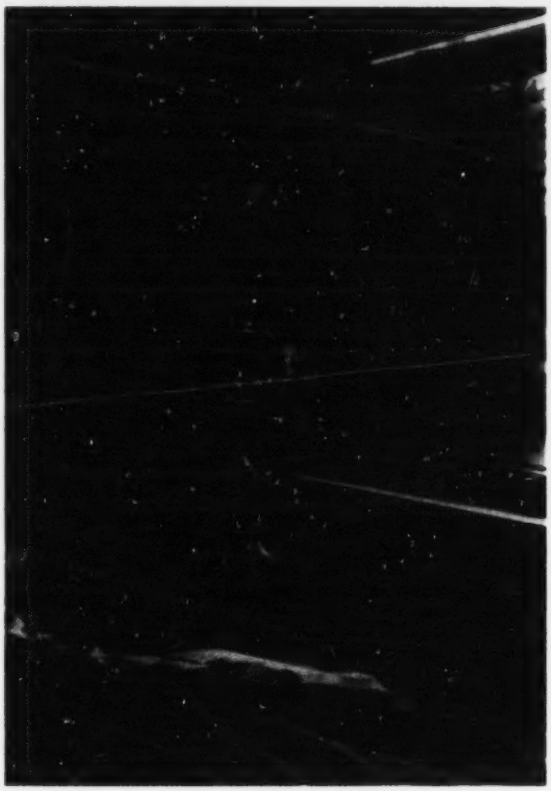

# Can They Make It On Their Own?

## Aging Out Of Foster Care– A Report on New York City's Independent Living Program

CCC
CITIZENS' COMMITTEE for CHILDREN
OF NEW YORK INC.

# Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Independent Living Coordinators at the 10 foster care agencies that we interviewed for taking time out of their busy schedules and giving CCC detailed information about their programs. The questionnaire was quite lengthy and they gave their utmost attention to our inquiries.

We would also like to thank the 13 volunteers from Citizens' Committee for Children who gave invaluable assistance, and we thank them for travelling throughout the City to interview Independent Living Coordinators at various foster care agencies and reviewing draft material. We would not have been able to collect the breadth of information without their help. In particular, we would like to thank Betty Wolff, the Chair of CCC's Independent Living Task Force, for recruiting volunteers and giving essential input to CCC's work. We would also like to thank Dr. Trudy Festinger and Mary Jane Cotter for reviewing CCC's questionnaire for accuracy and tone.

Lastly, a special thank you to the South Bronx Human Development Organization (SBHDO) for teaching CCC volunteers about the comprehensive training, materials and technical assistance that they provide to ACS, the voluntary foster care agencies and foster parents.

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# Executive Summary

Each year the New York City foster care system discharges approximately 650 young people between the ages of 18-21 to live on their own. Instead of being reunited with their families or adopted by another family, as is the case for the vast majority of the 37,000 children and youth living in foster care, these young people are expected to leave foster care and become both financially and emotionally self-supporting. Citizens' Committee for Children of New York (CCC) takes a special interest in these young people because they lack the advantages of growing up at home and being supported by their family as young adults. Our society generally accepts the notion that children continue to rely on their families for financial support, a bed to sleep in, a kitchen to eat in, or to lend an ear to as they transition to adulthood. A similar support system, however, is not available for youth aging out of foster care. These young people sometimes leave foster care lacking the means to support themselves and instead rely on public assistance or the shelter system for support, with no ties to the foster care agency.

Independent living services are offered to foster care youth who are 14 years of age or older and who have a goal of independent living.[1] For many of these youth, there is a limited amount of resources and lack of supports in place at the point of discharge, and too many youth leave the foster care system poorly prepared for the responsibilities of adulthood. From our perspective, there has not been enough attention focused on the provision of meaningful independent living services and their track record in preparing youth to live on their own successfully and independently, without relying on government resources. Based on the Independent Living Program guidelines established by the New York State Department of Social Services in 1987, local social service districts are required to provide 16 hours of life skills classes annually and vocational training to prepare youth for self-sufficiency.[2] At the point of discharge, youth must have permanent housing and referrals for services that the local foster care provider deems are necessary to live independently.[3] There are no requirements, however, for educational attainment, ongoing source of income or employability at the point of discharge. Foster care agencies are required to provide supervision for all youth who are discharged to independent living until their 21st birthday, regardless of whether the young person signed him/herself out of care or if the agency discharged the youth from care before that time.[4]

Neither State nor City data is available to track or evaluate the government's effectiveness for preparing youth to live independently, nor has there been a comprehensive evaluation of the supports in place for youth at the point of discharge. The effectiveness of New York State and New York City's Independent Living Programs has yet to be measured but we know from national efforts to study independent living programs in the states, that most programs do a poor job of preparing youth to live independently.[5] Recognizing this, Citizens' Committee for Children undertook a study to determine (1) how the voluntary foster care agencies in New York City have interpreted the State and City independent living regulations and implemented programming and services that lead to self-sufficiency for the youth in their care, and (2) whether the State and City regulations are adequate to support strong and productive young adults.

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1 Social Services Law §430.12(f). For these youth, the State decided that it would be in the child's best interest to remain in foster care and not return to his/her parents or be adopted. Youth 16 years of age or older who have resided in foster care for at least 12 months within the past 36 months and who have a goal of discharge to parents or a goal of adoption are also to be offered independent living services.

2 Social Services Law §430.12(f)(2)(i)(a)

3 Social Services Law §430.12(f)(3)(i)(a) and (c)

4 Social Services Law §430.12(f)(4)(b)

5 *Challenges in Helping Youths Live Independently*, Fagnoni, Cynthia M., Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues; Health, Education, and Human Services Division, United States General Accounting Office, May 13, 1999.

Based on CCC's findings, we made a series of recommendations, highlights of which are listed below:

**ACS AND VOLUNTARY FOSTER CARE AGENCIES SHOULD USE THE INFORMATION COLLECTED FROM FOSTER CARE AGENCIES TO EVALUATE THE CITY'S INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAM.** A revealing finding from our study is the absence of on-going evaluation of the success of the Independent Living Program by some voluntary foster care providers. Although voluntary foster care agencies do provide information regularly to ACS on the status of youth who have a goal of or who have been discharged to independent living through the Independent Living Quarterly Report, only two of the ten agencies that we surveyed could provide aggregated information on the youth in their care. In the Scope of Services, ACS requires foster care agencies to provide data on the number of youth who are discharged with permanent housing and employment, those discharged to shelter or prison, and those who rely on public assistance as their source of income from the point of discharge. Recognizing the benefits of regularly collecting information, ACS has updated the Independent Living Quarterly Reports to include additional categories to track the receipt of services and supports at the point of discharge.

- **RECOMMENDATIONS:** We support ACS' plan to enhance its data collection efforts, and we recognize their intent to track every youth aging out of care with respect to academic achievement, employment and housing. We recommend that ACS use these identified outcome measures of performance and the information collected in the Independent Living Quarterly Report on an aggregate basis for annual evaluations of the independent living programs of contract foster care providers as well as those directly operated by the City. Voluntary foster care agencies should also regularly review their Independent Living Quarterly Reports on an aggregate basis to evaluate the success of their independent living services in promoting self-sufficiency.

**FOSTER CARE AGENCIES MUST ENSURE THAT YOUTH WHO SIGN THEMSELVES OUT OF CARE AT AGE 18 HAVE PERMANENT HOUSING, EMPLOYMENT, HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE AND HAVE GRADUATED FROM HIGH SCHOOL.** Even though eight of the ten foster care agencies that we surveyed could not provide data on youth who are discharged to independent living, most of the Independent Living Coordinators stated that youth typically sign themselves out of foster care at age 18. Under State law, youth are permitted to sign themselves out of foster care at age 18 without the approval of a Family Court judge. If a youth signs him/herself out of care or simply leaves foster care after age 18 and does not return to the agency for a period of six months, the youth is deemed discharged to independent living. Once discharged, the foster care agencies are required to provide supervision to all youth until their 21st birthday, contingent upon the consent of the youth.[6]

- **RECOMMENDATIONS:** Foster care agencies must ensure that youth who sign themselves out of care have permanent housing, employment, health insurance coverage and have graduated from high school. Furthermore, the foster care agencies are required to provide supervision to all youth until their 21st birthday, regardless of whether the young person signed him/herself out of care or if the agency discharged the youth from care. Knowing that many youth will leave foster care at age 18, agencies must ensure that the necessary supports are in place before then.

**THE CORE CURRICULUM OF THE INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAM SHOULD BE EXPANDED TO INCLUDE PRACTICAL OPPORTUNITIES TO FIND AND KEEP A JOB, COMMUNITY SERVICE WORK OR AN INTERNSHIP, AND TO USE A BANK ACCOUNT.** The core of the Independent Living Program is the provision of 2 days (16 hours) of life skills instructional classes throughout the year, but the majority of youth do not attend these classes. Topics include career counseling, apartment finding, budgeting, shopping, cooking and house cleaning.[7] Although all of the agencies surveyed

6 Social Services Law §430.12(f)(4)(i)(b,c)

keep attendance at these classes for funding purposes, we found that only two agencies knew the proportion of youth in their independent living program who regularly attend life skills classes. And in these two agencies, only 20% and 50% of youth, respectively, attend regularly. Conflicts with school schedules, conflicts with work schedules or other after-school activities or appointments, lack of interest and the inconvenient location of the life skills classes all contribute to the low attendance rates.

- **RECOMMENDATIONS:** The role of the Independent Living Coordinator should be expanded to include more than coordinating and facilitating the life skills classes. The Coordinator should be required to provide learning opportunities which give youth practical experiences while they are in foster care. This experience should include opening and using a bank account, job experience and internship experience. The workshops should reinforce skills learned through daily living and interaction with foster families, staff and peers in group homes, or case planners. We also recommend that ACS work with a small number of independent living youth to survey other youth who have a goal of independent living to understand whether the classes are useful and to identify ways of improving the curriculum.

**FUNDING SHOULD BE PROVIDED TO STRENGTHEN AFTERCARE AND FOLLOW-UP SERVICES FOR YOUTH DISCHARGED TO INDEPENDENT LIVING.** The Social Services Law requires a six month trial discharge period for all youth discharged to independent living.[8] During this six month period, the foster care agencies are required to provide aftercare services that include any and all services identified in the Uniform Case Record (UCR) that are determined necessary to help the youth live independently.[9] The Social Services Law also requires that the local Social Services District maintain supervision of all youth who are discharged to independent living until they turn 21 years of age.[10] When we asked foster care agencies to describe the follow-up services offered, some of the ten agencies surveyed reported that they attempt to maintain monthly contact with the young person and/or would provide any assistance necessary that they requested, without much detail of what that would entail. The major barrier preventing foster care agencies from providing more comprehensive aftercare services is the lack of resources.

- **RECOMMENDATIONS:** We recommend that the State and City change the method of payment or allocate additional resources to provide appropriate follow-up services to youth who have been discharged to independent living. Funding aftercare services has been a critical issue for child welfare providers for years, and although they are required to provide follow-up services for a period of six months and supervision until age 21, the government has been reluctant to allocate resources for these services.

**ALL YOUTH WITH A GOAL OF INDEPENDENT LIVING SHOULD BE REQUIRED TO HAVE JOB EXPERIENCE AND BE EMPLOYED AT THE POINT OF DISCHARGE.** Each of the agencies surveyed offers employment training as required by City and State regulation, as part of the life skills classes. Only three of the agencies that we surveyed require their independent living youth to have paid work experience while in foster care. The Social Services Law does not require that youth have a source of income at the point of discharge to independent living. However, youth discharged to independent living are expected to support themselves from the point of discharge. In its new Scope of Services, ACS requires that all youth discharged to independent living be employed at the point of discharge, except if enrolled in a full-time post high school educational program. Of the two agencies from the ten that we surveyed that

7 Social Services Law §430.12(f)(2)(i)(a)

8 Social Services Law §430.12(f)(4)(i)(a)

9 Ibid.

10 Social Services Law §430.12(f)(4)(i)(b)

keep aggregate data on their clients, 60% and 66%, respectively had jobs upon discharge.

- **RECOMMENDATIONS:** We recommend that all youth with a goal of independent living have work experience prior to their discharge to ensure their ability to finance themselves independently upon leaving care. In particular, they should participate in the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) if they are unable to find a summer job on their own. Not only would they benefit from saving some of their earnings for their discharge, but having work experience will provide them with additional employment opportunities. We recommend that even youth enrolled in school full-time be required to have a job at the point of discharge. The job does not have to be full-time, however these youth will need a source of income to support themselves while in college, university or a technical school.

**ALL YOUTH WHO ARE DISCHARGED TO INDEPENDENT LIVING MUST HAVE A PERMANENT PLACE TO LIVE AT THE POINT OF DISCHARGE.** We found that eight of the ten agencies that we surveyed had no data on the percentage of youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997 to live in permanent housing, shelter, hotel or other living arrangement. Of the two agencies that could provide this information, one agency reported that all of its clients had been discharged to permanent housing, while the second agency stated that 33% of its clients had been discharged to permanent housing, 17% were discharged to a shelter and 50% were discharged to a college dorm or lived with a family member. Only two of the ten agencies that we surveyed have a housing specialist, although each agency admitted that securing housing for their clients is extremely challenging. For those agencies without a housing specialist, the youth's caseworker, who generally has no specific expertise in locating housing, is responsible for finding permanent housing. The caseworkers rely on the newspapers, linkages with the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), relationships with landlords, and their own staff networks.

Two funds administered by ACS, the Discharge Grant and the Foster Care Housing Subsidy, are meant to shorten the length of stay in foster care and return children to safe and stable families. Youth discharged to independent living are eligible for both of these grants if their sole barrier to discharge is lack of housing. Three of the ten agencies that we surveyed kept data on the proportion of youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997 and who received a discharge grant. And only two agencies kept data on the number of youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997 with a housing subsidy, and one of these agencies reported that it took one year for the approval process to be completed.

- **RECOMMENDATIONS:** First, ACS must strictly enforce its requirement that all youth discharged to independent living have permanent housing. To reach this goal, we recommend that all youth discharged to independent living receive a Discharge Grant and Housing Subsidy if they meet the eligibility criteria. We also recommend that all foster care agencies have comprehensive listings of government subsidized housing programs that are available to youth who have been discharged to independent living. The South Bronx Human Development Organization (SBHDO) and the Independent Living Consortium are working with a team of housing specialists to help foster care agencies locate affordable housing for youth aging out of foster care. In addition to the work at the SBHDO, we also recommend that each foster care agency employ staff who have demonstrated expertise in finding housing and are trained and knowledgeable about all of the government subsidized programs for low income, set-aside housing such as NYCHA housing for youth who are leaving the foster care system and are being discharged to independent living, and private real estate.

## Background

In recent testimony presented to the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Human Resources, Committee on Ways and Means, the United States General Accounting Office (GAO) identified several major challenges confronting youth who leave foster care to live independently.[11] Based on its ongoing work in California, Maryland, Texas and New York, the GAO found that these foster care systems: fail to provide vocational services due to lack of program affordability or lack of programs that met the youths' employment potential; lack fully-developed relationships and linkages with employers; fail to provide hands-on activities to enhance the life skills classes; lack adquate housing upon leaving foster care; and lack sufficient aftercare services to support youth who have already left foster care.

The GAO released a subsequent report that further examined the services provided by the states to youth with a goal of independent living, and their effectiveness on preparing youth for self-sufficiency.[12] This report confirmed the findings presented in the GAO's earlier testimony, including a lack of linkages with employers, lack of practical experiences while in foster care, and a lack of supervised living arrangements before youth are discharged. Furthermore, the report noted that there have been few studies that measure the effectiveness of independent living programs in the states or nationally, and that a method of review to assess the effectiveness of these programs in the states does not exist.[13] Noting that there is limited monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of independent living programs nationally, the GAO will examine the role of HHS regarding the development and implementation of performance measures.

To address some of the shortcomings of indenpendent living services, the President and Congress introduced new federal legislation in an effort to improve the likelihood of a successful transition to adulthood and self-sufficiency. The Foster Care Independence Act, which was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives by Nancy Johnson (R-CT) and Ben Cardin (D-MD), passed the House 380-6. The same bill was introduced in the U.S. Senate by Senators John Chafee (R-RI) and John Rockefeller IV (D-WV) and passed unanimously in November 1999, and was signed by President Clinton in December 1999. Among other provisions, this landmark legislation (1) increases federal funding available for independent living services from $70 million to $105 million; (2) allows states to use up to 30% of their independent living dollars to provide room and board for youth between 18-21 years who have left foster care; (3) gives states the option to extend Medicaid coverage to all youth up to age 21 who have left foster care; (4) allows states to determine at what age independent living services can be offered and (5) increases the assets/savings that foster care youth can have and still be eligible for services from $1,000 to $10,000. These additional resources will provide for enhanced skills training for youth prior to being discharged to independent living and will also expand permanent housing and health insurance coverage up to their 21st birthday for young people living on their own, two of the major resources this population lacks. The passage of the Foster Care Independence Act marks a renewed commitment to older youth in foster care and will provide states with significant resources to help these youth transition to self-sufficiency.

Additionally, although not intended to specifically address the needs of youth who have a goal of independent living, the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), which was passed in 1997, could reduce the number of youth discharged from foster care to live on their own. In an effort to reduce long lengths of stay in foster care and expedite permanency for children, ASFA requires states to

11 *Challenges in Helping Youths Live Independently*, Fagnoni, Cynthia M., Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues, Health, Education, and Human Services Division, United States General Accounting Office, May 13, 1999.

12 *Effectiveness of Independent Living Services Unknown*, United States General Accounting Office, November 1999.

13 Ibid.

file termination of parental rights petitions after a child has been in foster care for 15 of the last 22 months.[14] All children placed in out-of-home care and cared for through the use of federal IV-E[15] foster care dollars are subject to this law, which includes youth who have a goal of independent living.[16] The longer that children stay in foster care the less likely that they will return home or be adopted. Currently youth with a goal of independent living tend to stay in foster care for long periods of time that can extend over five years.

Based on New York State regulations, the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS) developed its own set of independent living regulations. The inadequacy of the State regulations prompted ACS to change its own Independent Living Program and ACS is currently strengthening the program requirements as outlined in its Request For Proposal (RFP) for new foster care contracts. Included in the RFP, ACS will require that each youth discharged to independent living has, in addition to the State requirements, a medical home, a job or full-time enrollment in post-secondary education, and at least an eighth grade competency in reading and math. ACS also intends to collect data from the voluntary agencies on the youth discharged to independent living, as outlined in the RFP.

Each foster care agency that contracts with ACS has developed its own Independent Living Skills Program, consistent with State and City requirements to give youth the skills and support necessary to live on their own. Under the direction of the Independent Living Coordinator, each foster care agency provides the required minimum 16 hours of formalized life skills instruction, while youth work with a case planner at the agency responsible for monitoring their care and preparing for their discharge to independent living. In general, foster care agencies do not have case planners who work exclusively with youth who have a goal of independent living. Most case planners carry caseloads that also include infants and young children who have a goal of reunification or adoption.

More than a decade after the inception of the Independent Living Program in New York State, there is a renewed attention being paid to youth who have a goal of independent living, as evidenced by the federal Foster Care Independence Act and the higher standards being implemented at ACS. Although necessary building blocks to strengthening independent living services, the new ACS standards are still too modest and ACS could put to better use the data collected from voluntary foster care agencies to evaluate the success of the City's Independent Living Program. As New York City shifts to a neighborhood-based system of service delivery for preventive and foster care services, ACS has the opportunity to improve the quality and efficacy of independent living services and begin to track outcomes for youth aging out of the foster care system.

[14] There are three notable exceptions when states do not have to file termination petitions after a child has been in foster care for 15 of the last 22 months. They are (1) if the family did not receive the necessary services to regain their children; (2) if the child is living with a kinship foster parent (which is a state option that New York State adopted) and (3) if it is not in the best interests of the child, which is defined by federal and state law.

[15] Title IV-E is a section of the Federal Social Security Act that provides funding for the room and board, services and administrative costs of children in foster care.

[16] New York State has opted to exclude youth who are placed out-of-home through the juvenile justice system from this requirement.

## Methodology

Between October 1998 and March 1999, CCC conducted a research project through its Independent Living Services Task Force to learn how foster care agencies in New York City have implemented the New York State Independent Living regulations and the ACS Independent Living Program guidelines. With the assistance of 13 trained expert and lay volunteers (Appendix A), CCC developed a survey instrument (Appendix B) and interviewed the Independent Living Coordinators at 10 of the 62 voluntary foster care agencies in New York City. We collected information in seven areas: Program Design, Skills Development, Life Skills Classes, Foster Parents, Caseworkers, Discharge, and Aftercare Services. Where applicable, we asked agencies to provide data on youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997, which we chose as a base year. To ensure a range of experiences, we chose agencies that serve a large number of youth in their independent living programs as well as those that serve fewer youth with a goal of independent living. To answer our inquiries, we interviewed Independent Living Coordinators about their provision of services, including the components of their independent living program, the resources available to promote self-sufficiency, and the training offered to caseworkers and foster parents. The information that CCC sought included the proportion of youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997 with health insurance, a source of income, employment, permanent housing, a bank account, a high school diploma or GED equivalent, and vocational training.

We also conducted a focus group of 15 young people receiving independent living services at one foster care agency, to learn about their preparation for learning to live on their own. Lastly, we reviewed the ACS Foster Care Standards, the ACS Scope of Services in the new Request For Proposal (RFP), the New York State Social Services Law, and conducted a literature review of existing research on the effectiveness of independent living programs nationally.

CCC undertook this study to determine whether the Independent Living Program regulations created by ACS are sufficient to help youth with a goal of independent living achieve self-sufficiency, and to understand how the contract foster care agencies have interpreted and implemented these government guidelines and requirements to provide comprehensive services to the youth they serve.

# Findings and Recommendations

## *I. Improving Program Quality*

**ACS AND VOLUNTARY FOSTER CARE AGENCIES SHOULD USE THE INFORMATION COLLECTED FROM FOSTER CARE AGENCIES TO EVALUATE THE CITY'S INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAM.**

**FINDINGS:** A revealing finding from our study is the absence of on-going evaluation of the success of the Independent Living Program by some voluntary foster care providers. Voluntary foster care agencies are required to submit a Uniform Case Record (UCR) to ACS every six months for each youth that outlines the youth's progress in meeting his/her permanency goals, and an Independent Living Quarterly Report every quarter. The Quarterly Report requests detailed information about the independent living services offered while in care, including information on educational attainment, vocational training and employment status, and health care, and requests information on some of the supports in place at the point of discharge. Although voluntary foster care agencies do provide information regularly to ACS on the status of youth who have a goal of or who have been discharged to independent living, only two of the ten agencies that we surveyed could provide aggregated information on the youth in their care. The other eight agencies gave estimates or stated that they would send the information to us later, which they did not. We sought data regarding the proportion of youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997: with health insurance, a source of income, employment, permanent housing, a bank account, a high school diploma or GED equivalent, and vocational training.

In its Scope of Services, ACS requires foster care agencies to provide data on the number of youth who are discharged with permanent housing and employment, those discharged to shelter or prison, and those who rely on public assistance as their source of income from the point of discharge. Recognizing the benefits of regularly collecting information, ACS has updated the Independent Living Quarterly Reports to include additional categories to track the receipt of services and supports at the point of discharge. In its Scope of Services, ACS requires foster care agencies to provide data to ensure that the following four goals are met: (1) youth are discharged with medical coverage in place, (2) youth are discharged with at least an eighth grade competency in reading and math, (3) youth are discharged with a job or are enrolled in full-time post high school education, and (4) youth are discharged with adequate housing. Lastly, foster care agencies will be required to provide sufficient information to enable ACS to collect data on and monitor additional performance indicators as appropriate, so that it can become part of a fuller evaluation process for the future.

Although ACS reviews the Independent Living Quarterly Reports on an agency-by-agency basis and intends to work with individual agencies to improve their ability to prepare youth for self-sufficiency, the extent to which ACS utilizes the information collected on an aggregate basis to review the strengths and weaknesses of the Independent Living Program and ensure improvement remains unclear.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** We support ACS' plan to enhance its data collection efforts, and we recognize their intent to track every youth aging out of care with respect to academic achievement, employment and housing, as listed in ACS' Permanency and Placement Principles and Outcome Indicators.[17] We recommend that ACS use these identified outcome measures of performance and the information collected in the Independent Living Quarterly Report on an aggregate basis for annual evaluations of the independent living programs of voluntary foster care providers as well as those directly operated by the City. Voluntary foster care agencies should also regularly review their Independent Living Quarterly Reports on an aggregate basis to evaluate the success of their independent living services in promoting self-sufficiency. We also recommend including categories on health insur-

[17] *ACS Permanency and Placement Principles and Outcome Indicators*, Administration for Children's Services, September 10, 1999.

ance coverage, medical home and link to mental health services in the Discharge section of the Quarterly Report.

While ACS' data collection efforts outlined in its Scope of Services are excellent, the information to be collected and the frequency of its collection need more details. We also recommend that ACS require a corrective action plan and provide technical assistance to agencies which fail to meet minimum data reporting standards.

We also recommend that ACS track youth discharged to independent living by cross-referencing their own management information systems against that of the Human Resources Administration (HRA), Department of Homeless Services (DHS) and New York Police Department (NYPD) on an annual basis to monitor whether these youth are actually living in the community or whether they have fallen into another system offering government support or perhaps have had trouble with the law. In order to make cross-referencing possible, ACS and the other City agencies will need to use common identifiers.

### FOSTER CARE AGENCIES MUST ENSURE THAT YOUTH WHO SIGN THEMSELVES OUT OF CARE AT AGE 18 HAVE PERMANENT HOUSING, EMPLOYMENT, HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE AND HAVE GRADUATED FROM HIGH SCHOOL

**FINDINGS:** Even though eight of the ten foster care agencies that we surveyed could not provide aggregate data on youth who are discharged to independent living, most of the Independent Living Coordinators stated that youth typically sign themselves out of foster care at age 18. Under State law, youth are permitted to sign themselves out of foster care at age 18 without the approval of a Family Court judge. If a youth signs him/herself out of care or simply leaves foster care after age 18 and does not return to the agency for a period of six months, the youth is deemed discharged to independent living. Once discharged, the foster care agencies are required to provide supervision to all youth until their 21st birthday, contingent upon the consent of the youth.[18]

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** Foster care agencies must ensure that youth who sign themselves out of care have permanent housing, employment, health insurance coverage and have graduated from high school. Furthermore, the foster care agencies are required to provide supervision to all youth until their 21st birthday, regardless of whether the young person signed him/herself out of care or if the agency discharged the youth from care. Knowing that many youth will leave foster care at age 18, agencies must ensure that the necessary supports are in place before then.

### EACH FOSTER CARE AGENCY SHOULD HIRE STAFF WHO HAVE DEMONSTRATED EXPERTISE IN FINDING JOBS, EMPLOYMENT TRAINING AND VOCATIONAL PROGRAMS

**FINDINGS:** Half of the agencies surveyed have an employment specialist and two agencies have formal linkage agreements with local employers. Nine agencies reported having informal linkages and referral agreements, one agency has no linkages but thinks that they would be a good idea and one agency uses a temp agency to find employment for its clients.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** We recommend that each foster care agency employ staff who have a demonstrated expertise in finding employment to ensure that independent living youth have work experience while in foster care as well as secure employment upon leaving care. Each foster care agency is provided independent living monies from the City that allows them to hire qualified staff, and should hire those who are expert in finding jobs, employment training and vocational programs. All foster care agencies should also be encouraged to draw on resources in the community to develop the youth's employment skills, including using speakers from the Department of Labor, as done by many of the agencies that CCC interviewed. Caseworkers cannot be expected to be expert in several different challenging areas, including finding employment, housing and gaining an education, while also carrying a case-

[18] Social Services Law §430.12(f)(4)(i)(b,c)

load of children and families who require comprehensive services to shorten the length of time if foster care. Employment skills and jobs are vital to the success of youth living independently.

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) is a source of jobs for youth and we recommend that every foster care agency have a listing of each of the job programs for youth offered by the Department. Congress has recently made significant changes to the job training programs and employment services for youth in the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), which was passed in 1998. Under WIA, the Department of Labor plans to open 30 Job Centers around the country to provide one-stop employment assistance for anyone regardless of income, including an initial assessment, job counseling, and job search. The youth programs under WIA are available to young people between the ages of 14-21, and includes the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) which employed approximately 36,000 youth in New York City in the Summer 1999. Other services offered to youth under WIA include a range of preparatory activities, occupational training, substance abuse counseling, adult mentors and follow-up for at least 12 months.[19]

We support ACS' goal to pursue additional revenue sources to establish and expand related employment and training programs, as outlined in the Scope of Services. We also recommend that ACS work with the federal DOL and the City Department of Employment (DOE) to maximize the use of government supported job programs for youth in foster care and for young adults who are discharged to independent living. For example, every youth with a goal of independent living should have the opportunity to participate in the SYEP program, if they are unable to secure a summer job on their own. Only a few of the agencies that we surveyed reported using SYEP as a source of employment for youth receiving independent living services, leaving many other youth without the benefits of this summer employment program.

**THE CORE CURRICULUM OF THE INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAM SHOULD BE EXPANDED TO INCLUDE PRACTICAL OPPORTUNITIES TO FIND AND KEEP A JOB, COMMUNITY SERVICE WORK OR AN INTERNSHIP, AND TO USE A BANK ACCOUNT**

**FINDINGS:** All of the Independent Living Coordinators that we interviewed were strongly committed to providing necessary supports to ensure that youth are able to live independently upon being discharged from foster care. Each was invested in providing effective and practical life skills classes and were generally interested in seeing their clients flourish. Many of the Independent Living Coordinators that we surveyed went further to enhance the independent living program by bringing youth to college fairs, cultural programs, and other field trips, and creating entrepreneurial projects for them. One agency secured a staff member from the Board of Education (BOE) to provide assistance in developing resumes and information on how to pursue different careers. These attempts to supplement Independent Living services, however, are not systemic or available to all youth with a goal of independent living.

The core of the Independent Living Program is the provision of 2 days (16 hours) of life skills instructional classes throughout the year, but the majority of youth do not attend these classes. Topics include career counseling, apartment finding, budgeting, shopping, cooking and house cleaning.[20] Although all of the agencies surveyed keep attendance at these classes for funding purposes, we found that only two knew the proportion of youth in their independent living program who regularly attend life skills classes. And in these two agencies, only 20% and 50% of youth, respectively, attend regularly. The

[19] Children's Defense Fund, *The State of America's Children Yearbook 1999*, May 1999.

[20] Social Services Law §430.12(f)(2)(i)(a)

remaining eight agencies in our survey estimated that anywhere from 2% to 80% of the youth with a goal of independent living regularly attend the life skills classes. Even though stipends are provided for those youth who are 16 years of age and older who attend the classes, as provided under state law, attendance rates remain poor.

Conflicts with school schedules, conflicts with work schedules or other after-school activities or appointments, lack of interest and the inconvenient location of the life skills classes all contribute to the low attendance rates. Seven of the agencies that we surveyed reported offering life skills classes after school from 3:00-6:00 p.m., three agencies offer these classes in the evenings between 6:00-9:00 p.m. and four agencies offer the classes on the weekends. Only half of the agencies that we surveyed reported that they offer the class at an alternate time if young people are not able to attend because of school or work schedule conflicts. One agency just completed a needs assessment of its independent living youth and will now offer the life skills classes two evenings each month to accommodate the youth's schedules.

ACS has begun redesigning the City's child welfare system to create neighborhood-based services for children and families, which should locate the life skills classes closer to where youth in foster care live. Under the new ACS plan, children will be placed in a foster home or group home in the same community from which they lived with their parents, if it is in the child's best interests, and each foster care agency will be assigned to serve certain community districts. As a result, the foster care agency's offices will be in close proximity to youth being served in its independent living program, as opposed to having youth travel from all five boroughs to attend the life skills classes at the agency's headquarters in another part of the City.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** The role of the Independent Living Coordinator should be expanded to include more than coordinating and facilitating the life skills classes. The Coordinator should be required to provide learning opportunities which give youth practical experiences while they are in foster care. This experience should include opening and using a bank account, job experience and internship experience. The workshops should reinforce skills learned through daily living and interaction with foster families, staff and peers in group homes, or case planners.

We also recommend that ACS work with a small number of independent living youth to survey other youth who have a goal of independent living to understand whether the classes are useful and to identify ways of improving the curriculum. Youth satisfaction surveys could identify reasons why they do not attend the life skills classes, which would be valuable information for agencies to use in refining and upgrading services and activities. Lastly, we recommend that foster care agencies track attendance at the life skills classes over time and use the results to schedule and develop the classes.

We support the ACS recommendation to require all foster care agencies to develop mentoring programs for youth who have a goal of independent living. In addition, there must be a higher expectation from foster families and group home staff to impart the same kind of life skills that most adolescents learn from their families and to develop positive and supportive relationships. Whether youth live with a foster family or in a group home prior to being discharged to independent living, each should have someone to rely on for support as they transition to adulthood. Some youth who are discharged to independent living return to a family member, extended family member, or remain living with their foster parent(s), however there are many youth who do not have these options. We believe that in the absence of a family, foster care agencies must serve as a source of support for youth as they live independently.

The City's shift to provide neighborhood-based child welfare services will make it more likely that families will be able to visit their children more easily and maintain relationships with them while in foster care. Furthermore, foster care agencies will be well-informed of the strengths and weaknesses of the community(ies) that they serve and have relationships with other community-based organizations. Living in foster care in the same community as their biological family, being linked with other community-based organizations while in care, and working in the community will help facilitate a network of support for youth when they leave foster care.

**FUNDING SHOULD BE PROVIDED TO STRENGTHEN AFTERCARE AND FOLLOW-UP SERVICES FOR YOUTH DISCHARGED TO INDEPENDENT LIVING**

**FINDINGS:** The Social Services Law requires a six month trial discharge period for all youth discharged to independent living.[21] During this six month period, the foster care agencies are required to provide aftercare services that include any and all services identified in the Uniform Case Record (UCR) that are determined necessary to help the youth live independently.[22] We found that of the two agencies that kept data, none of the youth who were released to trial discharge in 1997 came back into care during the trial discharge period.

The Social Services Law also requires that the local Social Services District maintain supervision of all youth who are discharged to independent living until they turn 21 years of age.[23] In New York City, the foster care agencies that contract with ACS, the local social services district, have the responsibility to provide aftercare services to youth who are discharged to independent living. The law states that this supervision includes, at a minimum, monthly contact unless the youth has maintained stable housing and adequate income for a period of six months, at which point the district/foster care agency may assume quarterly contacts. During this supervision period, the services provided must include referrals to needed services, including housing and income services, and follow-up to ensure that the youth received the needed services. If the youth cannot be contacted for more than 60 days, then the contact requirements are lifted. We received a range of responses when we asked the ten foster care agencies surveyed whether there were follow-up services offered to youth after final discharge and if so, what services were provided. Although all of the agencies reported that follow-up services are available, one agency stated that these services are available only if the youth was discharged from the agency and not if the youth signed him/herself out of care. The law does not make any distinction for these youth and in fact requires that each foster care agency provides follow-up supervision until the youth turns 21.

When we asked foster care agencies to describe the follow-up services offered, some of the agencies surveyed reported that they attempt to maintain monthly contact with the young person and/or would provide any assistance necessary that they requested. One agency reported using alumni meetings for youth and quarterly social activities as part of its aftercare services. And yet another stated that its aftercare services, which include advice, counseling, referrals and workshops, are limited to 100 hours. When we pressed for more detail, three agencies reported that they provide on-going instructional classes to youth who have been discharged to independent living; five agencies will provide financial assistance for clothing; and six agencies will provide financial assistance for transportation. Other forms of assistance include money for rent or utilities, individual casework meetings, mother/baby parenting classes, therapy, educational support, and other referrals. We found that only four of the ten agencies surveyed provide reunions for youth who have been discharged to independent living, although one agency upon being asked this question thought that these gatherings would be a great asset to their clients. We also found that most foster care agencies surveyed believe that youth who are discharged to independent living have developed a network of support in the community where they choose to live. Two of these agencies gave a caveat to their response and stated that these youth still need a lot of help in developing these relationships and support systems, indicating that they were not always successful.

The major barrier preventing foster care agencies from providing more comprehensive aftercare services is the lack of resources. Three agencies

21 Social Services Law §430.12(f)(4)(i)(a)

22 Ibid.

23 Social Services Law §430.12(f)(4)(i)(b)

reported that they use private donations and/or grants to supplement their post-discharge services. All youth who are discharged to independent living are on trial discharge for the first six months, during which time foster care agencies are required to provide aftercare services to the youth that include caseworker contacts and services consistent with the youth's needs.[24] As mentioned earlier, foster care agencies are also required to provide supervision to all youth who are discharged to independent living until their 21st birthday.[25] Foster care agencies are paid on a per diem basis for every day that the youth is in their custody, and some funding for aftercare services is calculated into the rate. The funding, however, ceases the day that the youth is no longer living in foster care. Additional resources would allow foster care agencies to hire an aftercare caseworker instead of expecting the foster care caseworkers to assume this additional responsibility when they already have a full caseload of other children in foster care.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** We recommend that the State and City change the method of payment or allocate additional resources to provide appropriate follow-up services to youth who have been discharged to independent living. Funding after-

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The Work Appreciation for Youth (WAY) Program is an excellent model for providing aftercare services to youth who are released from residential placement. Developed by The Children's Village in 1984, WAY is an independent living skills program that also includes a strong aftercare component to at-risk youth who are discharged from out-of-home placement. Originally designed to work with youth who were discharged from the Residential Treatment Center at The Children's Village, the WAY program can also be provided to youth who have a goal of independent living. The Children's Village is pursuing new partnerships with other child welfare agencies, housing projects, correctional agencies and other community-based organizations to adapt the WAY model to their populations. Designed as a five stage program, the WAY model teaches youth the value of employment and helps them to develop employment skills through non-paid chores and community service, beginning paid work experience, advanced work experience, and community-based work experience - which are all part of the first four stages of the program. Youth are given extensive job coaching, performance evaluations and counseling through each of these four stages.

Once discharged from the agency, youth enter the fifth stage of the program and are provided a range of follow-up services, including mentoring, tutoring, and general planning, for a period of five years. During this period the youth are expected to have a savings plan that can be matched by the WAY program annually, up to $500. Those in job training programs may receive an additional $1,000 annually for two years, and those attending college can also receive $1,000 annually for four years. Of the 126 youth who began the WAY program at The Children's Village RTC program in 1984-1991, 69% completed the five-year program.

Based on the preliminary findings from the WAY Alumni Study, The Children's Village found that 92% of those interviewed had completed high school or the equivalent, 59% had some college education, 50% of those interviewed were working full time at the point of the interview with a median income of $18,336, and 31% were working part-time.[26] We strongly recommend that ACS adopt the WAY model and require each foster care agency to implement this program for youth who have a goal of independent living.

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24 Social Services Law §430.12(f)(4)(i)(a)

25 Social Services Law §430.12(f)(4)(i)(b)

26 The Children's Village, Research Department, Evaluation of the WAY program.

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care services has been a critical issue for child welfare providers for years, and although they are required to provide follow-up services for a period of six months and supervision until age 21, the government has been reluctant to allocate resources for these services. When calculating a caseworker's caseload, those youth receiving aftercare should be included in the count to reflect the caseworker's true workload.

## *II. Improving Child Outcomes*

### PRIOR TO DISCHARGE TO INDEPENDENT LIVING EACH YOUNGSTER SHOULD BE A HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE OR HAVE A GED EQUIVALENT

**FINDINGS:** The New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) requires that all youth with a goal of independent living be provided with vocational training or be enrolled in a high school program which will lead to graduation prior to the youth's 20th birthday or be enrolled full-time in a college or university while in foster care.[27] OCFS regulations do not specify any educational attainment level for youth at the point of discharge. In its new Foster Care Standards, the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS) requires that each child discharged to independent living have an eighth grade competency in reading and math.[28] However, the State Department of Education has created new Regent's standards for high school students to be phased in over the next few years, that requires them to pass five Regent's exams in order to receive a high school diploma.

In our survey, we asked the Independent Living Coordinators what proportion of youth who had been discharged to independent living in 1997 had a high school diploma or GED equivalent upon discharge, and only two of the ten agencies could provide data for this question. Of the two agencies, one reported 60% and the other reported 67%, which are very high numbers compared to studies completed in other states.[29] We also found that eight of the foster care agencies that we surveyed currently have educational specialists and another agency plans to hire this specialist in the near future.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** We recommend that ACS and foster care agencies demonstrate diligent efforts to ensure that all youth with a goal of independent living obtain a high school diploma, GED equivalent, or special education certificate prior to discharge. ACS collects data on high school graduation rates and school achievement in the Independent Living Quarterly Reports, but needs to set higher standards for youth with a goal of independent living that comport with the Regent's standards.

To ensure that youth with a goal of independent living finish high school prior to discharge, we recommend that each foster care agency hire staff with demonstrated expertise in providing educational supports and enrichment for these youth while still in care. The youth's individual caseworker is already charged with monitoring their educational development and should work to ensure that high school completion is a priority.

We also recommend that vocational training be offered to complement, not replace, their high school education or GED. As stated earlier, the State regulations permit youth with a goal of independent living to enroll in a vocational training program instead of finishing high school. While vocational training programs are a valuable asset to young people to develop their expertise in a particular field, skills training must be balanced with academic proficiency.

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27 Social Services Law, §430.12(f)(2)(i)(a)

28 Foster Care Standards, Administration for Children's Services, page 46, March 1999.

29 See Westat Inc. (1986). Independent Living services for youth in substitute care. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of health and Human Services, Children's Bureau; *The Status of Older Adolescents at Exit from Out-of-Home Care*, J. Curtis McMillen and Jayne Tucker, Child Welfare, Vol. LXXVIII, #3, May/June, Child Welfare League of America, 1999; *The Wisconsin Study of Youth Aging Out of Out-Of-Home Care: A Portrait of Children About to Leave Care*, Mark Courtney, Irving Piliavin and Andrew Grogan-Kaylor., 1995.

**ALL YOUTH WITH A GOAL OF INDEPENDENT LIVING SHOULD BE REQUIRED TO HAVE JOB EXPERIENCE AND BE EMPLOYED AT THE POINT OF DISCHARGE**

**FINDINGS:** Each of the agencies surveyed offers employment training as required by City and State regulations, as part of the life skills classes. The training consists of how to find a job, proper attire, interview skills, resume writing and working with a supervisor, among other skills. Only three of the agencies that we surveyed require their independent living youth to have paid work experience while in foster care. The Independent Living Coordinators at the remaining seven agencies were unable to answer this question. Yet a few of the agencies also offer internship opportunities and rely on employment training programs that are offered outside of their agency. The Fund for the City of New York has developed a comprehensive database of employment training programs in New York City, called TRAIN. The South Bronx Human Development Organization (SBHDO) has purchased this database and has made it available to all of the foster care agencies at no cost.

Internships provide valuable job experiences and should be encouraged at every foster care agency. One agency that we surveyed uses its Board members to provide internships to youth in its care, and has also developed relationships with members of the New York Stock Exchange. Another agency offers internships within the agency itself, and another encourages youth to engage in entrepreneurial activities such as making and selling their own T-shirts to teach job skills and money management.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** We recommend that all youth with a goal of independent living have work experience prior to their discharge to ensure their ability to finance themselves independently upon leaving care. In particular, they should participate in the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) if they are unable to find a summer job on their own. Not only would they benefit from saving some of their earnings for their discharge, but having work experience will provide them with additional employment opportunities. We also recommend that foster care agencies use TRAIN, a database developed by the Fund for the City of New York, and rely on the agency's Board of Directors and local merchant's association/Chamber of Commerce as a resource for internship or employment opportunities for youth with a goal of independent living.

**FINDINGS:** The Social Services Law does not require that youth have a source of income at the point of discharge to independent living. However, youth discharged to independent living are expected to support themselves from the point of discharge. In its new Scope of Services, ACS requires that all youth discharged to independent living be employed at the point of discharge, except if enrolled in a full-time post high school educational program. Of the two agencies from the ten that we surveyed that keep aggregate data on their clients, 60% and 66%, respectively had jobs upon discharge. There is no other source of income for this population of young people, as they will not likely return to their biological families and should not be expected to rely on public assistance for support. Only six of the agencies surveyed reported that a source of income is a requirement for discharge to independent living. One agency stated that it is usual for youth to be discharged to independent living and be supported by their biological parents' public assistance check.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** We support ACS' new requirement that all youth discharged to independent living have a job at the point of discharge. We recommend that even youth enrolled in school full-time be required to have a job at the point of discharge. The job does not have to be full-time, however these youth will need a source of income to support themselves while in college, university or a technical school. We recommend that foster care agencies employ staff who have demonstrated expertise in employment services in order to help youth find work to continue after foster care. ACS and the voluntary foster care agencies should not be permitted to discharge youth to independent living without an ongoing source of income, which is a prescription for failure to reach self-sufficiency.

**ALL YOUTH WHO ARE DISCHARGED TO INDEPENDENT LIVING SHOULD HAVE A BANK ACCOUNT PRIOR TO DISCHARGE**

**FINDINGS:** Several questions in our survey revealed confusion about the rules and regulations governing youth in foster care with a goal of independent living. For example, when asked what proportion of youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997 had a bank account at discharge, one agency stated that youth are not permitted to have bank accounts while in foster care, while another agency reported that if they have a bank account they are not allowed to have a balance in excess of $1,200. The government does not bar youth in foster care from having bank accounts, but according to federal regulations, foster care youth can only have a maximum of $1,000 in assets or savings to be eligible for foster care services. However, the federal Foster Care Independence Act will increase allowable savings to $10,000. Three agencies stated that all youth discharged to independent living had a bank account upon discharge and five agencies did not provide information to answer this question.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** Foster care agencies should help all youth with a goal of independent living open a bank account while still in foster care. Youth could deposit their stipend and paychecks into their bank account. Maintaining a bank account not only complements the skills learned in the life skills classes but gives young people the actual experience of handling money, and also provides them with the mechanism for saving money for their inevitable discharge. Youth should be taught to use a bank account to begin to establish credit and a pattern of savings so they are better prepared to handle their finances as an adult and no longer in foster care.

**ALL YOUTH WHO ARE DISCHARGED TO INDEPENDENT LIVING MUST HAVE A PERMANENT PLACE TO LIVE AT THE POINT OF DISCHARGE**

**FINDINGS:** Finding affordable housing in New York City is no easy task, especially for young people age 18-21 who earn low wages and are just embarking on their careers, without any other financial support from family members. The Social Services Law requires that youth with a goal of independent living be discharged to housing that will continue for at least 12 months after discharge, which does not include a shelter, SRO hotel or other congregate living situation that will require more than 10 unrelated persons to live together.[30]

We found that eight of the ten agencies that we surveyed had no data on the percentage of youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997 to live in permanent housing, shelter, hotel or other living arrangement. Of the two agencies that could provide this information, one agency reported that all of its clients had been discharged to permanent housing, while the second agency stated that 33% of its clients had been discharged to permanent housing, 17% were discharged to a shelter and 50% were discharged to a college dorm or lived with a family member. Only two of the ten agencies that we surveyed have a housing specialist, although each agency admitted that securing housing for their clients is extremely challenging. For those agencies without a housing specialist, the youth's caseworker, who generally has no specific expertise in locating housing, is responsible for finding permanent housing. The caseworkers rely on the newspapers, linkages with the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), relationships with landlords, and their own staff networks.

Two funds administered by ACS, the Discharge Grant and the Foster Care Housing Subsidy, are meant to shorten the length of stay in foster care and return children to safe and stable families. Youth discharged to independent living are eligible for both of these grants if their sole barrier to discharge is lack of housing.

The Discharge Grant is a one-time grant available to families whose children are ready to return home but lack essential furniture. The grant is to be spent on furniture or household

[30] Social Services Law §430.12(f)(3)(i)(c)

items, such as sheets, beds, or kitchen equipment. The Discharge Grant provides $750 to youth who are discharged to independent living to purchase the basic necessities for setting up their first home. Three of the ten agencies that we surveyed kept data on the proportion of youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997 and who received a discharge grant. Of these three agencies, 0%, 50%, and 100%, respectively, of the youth received the $750 grant upon discharge to independent living.

The Foster Care Housing Subsidy was created to expedite permanency for children in foster care whose only barrier to returning home was lack of adequate housing. This housing subsidy is administered as a $300 monthly cash grant that can pay for rent, rent arrears, security deposit, broker's fees, moving expenses, exterminator fees and/or repairs to eliminate any health or safety risks. The subsidy can continue monthly for a period of three years, for a maximum total payment of $10,800 until age 21.[31] Youth with a goal of independent living are eligible for the Foster Care Housing Subsidy, as well as families who are being reunified with their children and the only barrier is securing adequate housing. Of the ten agencies that we surveyed, however, only two agencies kept data on the proportion of youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997 with a housing subsidy. Of these two agencies, 0% and 17%, respectively, of the youth received the $300 monthly housing subsidy at the point of discharge. The agency that used the housing subsidy for its youth reported that it took one year for the approval process to be completed. The housing subsidy, however is available only to youth discharged to independent living until the age of 21, at which point the monies are terminated.

The Foster Care Housing Subsidy has been an underutilized resource for two reasons. First, there is a widespread lack of information that a Housing Subsidy is available for foster care youth being discharged to independent living. Another major problem that has prevented youth from using the housing subsidy is the bureaucratic delay at ACS that can draw-out the approval of a subsidy for up to a year.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** First, ACS must strictly enforce its requirement that all youth discharged to independent living have permanent housing. To reach this goal, we recommend that all youth discharged to independent living receive a Discharge Grant and Housing Subsidy if they meet the eligibility criteria. Every youth being discharged to independent living should qualify for these financial resources. In addition, even if a youth is discharged to independent living at age 21, they should be permitted to receive the housing subsidy for the full three year period, if necessary. The federal Foster Care Independence Act allows states to use up to 30% of its federal independent living funds for housing for youth ages 18-21 who are transitioning from foster care, which will greatly assist youth who are aging out of foster care in New York City. ACS must routinely send information to the foster care agencies detailing the components of the Housing Subsidy and Discharge Grant Programs, including eligibility requirements and the application process.

We also recommend that all foster care agencies have comprehensive listings of government subsidized housing programs that are available to youth who have been discharged to independent living. The South Bronx Human Development Organization (SBHDO) and the Independent Living Consortium are working with a team of housing specialists to help foster care agencies locate affordable housing for youth aging out of foster care. In addition to the work at the SBHDO, we also recommend that each foster care agency employ staff who have demonstrated expertise in finding housing and are trained and knowledgeable about all of the government subsidized programs for low income, set-aside housing such as NYCHA housing for youth who are leaving the foster care system and are being discharged to independent living, and private real estate.

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[31] Social Services Law §423.2(b)(16)(i); See also *Review of the Foster Care Housing Subsidy Program*, Alan G. Hevesi, City of New York Office of the Comptroller, Office of Policy Management and the Women's City Club of New York, August 1996.

Lastly, we recommend that foster care agencies track the stability of housing for youth discharged to independent living. We recognize the intentions of ACS to learn more about the stability of housing for youth discharged to independent living, as evidenced by the requirement in the Scope of Services that foster care agencies monitor the housing situation of each youth for up to two years after discharge from foster care and report to ACS on an annual basis. This requirement states that tracking can continue beyond the youth's 21st birthday. ACS should use this information to evaluate the quality of housing provided at the point of discharge, as well as to evaluate the level of self-sufficiency, resourcefulness and preparation given to youth while in foster care.

### FOSTER CARE AGENCIES MUST ASSIST YOUTH IN SECURING HEALTH INSURANCE THAT WILL CONTINUE AFTER THE POINT OF DISCHARGE TO INDEPENDENT LIVING

**FINDINGS:** All children and youth in foster care are covered by Medicaid while they are in care. Once they are discharged, however, Medicaid coverage does not automatically continue unless the young person meets the standard Medicaid eligibility criteria, which requires either no wages or very low earnings. To qualify for Medicaid as a single adult in New York, a youth's monthly income cannot exceed $592; excluding any financial assistance from the Foster Care Housing Subsidy or the Discharge Grant. We found that only one of the ten agencies that we surveyed could report on the percentage of youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997 with health insurance. This agency found that 60% of its clients left foster care with health insurance and were covered generally by their parents' insurance, or health insurance coverage at work or school. The other nine agencies surveyed could not provide any data.

While on the six month trial discharge, youth with a goal of independent living are automatically covered by Medicaid. However, in our interviews, the agencies appeared confused about the Medicaid eligibility criteria for young people age 18 or older with a goal of independent living. For example, one agency explained that Medicaid coverage while in foster care will automatically extend for 30 days after discharge, with no discussion about the possibility of re-certifying youth prior to discharge. Another agency stated that only those who are discharged and who also have a child(ren) qualify for Medicaid coverage, completely disregarding the eligibility of single adults for Medicaid if they meet certain income eligibility criteria. Only one agency stated that all youth being discharged to independent living receive assistance in reapplying for Medicaid.

The federal Foster Care Independence Act allows states to extend Medicaid coverage to youth who are discharged to independent living, up to their 21st birthday. Once this legislation is signed by President Clinton, more details on this Medicaid provision, including the source of funding, should follow. Youth who are single, working and non-disabled, generally do not qualify for Medicaid coverage and may not be offered private insurance through their employment. The Foster Care Independence Act will allow youth who leave foster care prior to their 21st birthday to benefit from health care coverage which they would not have otherwise qualified.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** We recommend that New York opt to extend Medicaid coverage to youth who are discharged to independent living, up to their 21st birthday, as permitted under the Foster Care Independence Act. We also recommend that foster care agencies assist youth in applying for Medicaid through the recertification process prior to discharge from foster care to prevent a lapse in coverage once discharged to independent living. In addition, foster care agencies should be required to link youth with a primary physician and mental health provider, if needed, upon their discharge to independent living. Foster care agencies should also inform these young people of the health and mental health services available on a sliding scale at public hospitals, community health centers and other safety net providers in their communities that they may want to use after their 21st birthday. Not only should youth have health insurance coverage, but they should actually have access to health and mental health services as well.

## Conclusion

Foster care agencies are responsible for providing the same nurturing, support and opportunities to young people in their care that young people experience when living with their own families. CCC believes that more attention must be paid to the provision of independent living services and the ability of youth to live on their own successfully, without relying on government resources. It is clear that there are a limited amount of resources and lack of supports in place at the point of discharge, and that too many youth leave the foster care system poorly prepared for the responsibilities of adulthood. The ACS Scope of Services is evidence of a renewed interest by the City to ensure that more supports are in place at the point of discharge, but the expectations of success for these young people is still too low and are not related to the costs of providing these services. To strengthen the City's Independent Living Program and achieve the goals of self-sufficiency, ACS will have to build new requirements into contracts currently being solicited, and cite new regulations to ensure that a comprehensive evaluation system is in place to monitor any implementation. The shift to a neighborhood-based system of service delivery should help create a network of support for young people as they leave foster care. Real change will require higher expectations for a successful transition to self-sufficiency, and a strong commitment and investment from both the State and City governments to develop self-assured, educated, skilled and financially independent young people who have grown up in the foster care system.

# APPENDIX A

## INDEPENDENT LIVING SERVICES TASK FORCE MEMBERS

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## APPENDIX B

### CITIZENS' COMMITTEE FOR CHILDREN'S

**TASK FORCE ON INDEPENDENT LIVING**

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

105 East 22nd Street, New York, NY 10010 ph: (212) 673-1800

#### GENERAL INFORMATION

Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to meet with us today to discuss your independent living program. We are grateful that you have agreed to share your expertise in the area of teaching young people the skills necessary to lead healthy and accomplished lives, and we appreciate the opportunity to hear firsthand about your experiences helping youth in foster care prepare for adult life and independence. Please know that any and all information that we collect during this interview will be held strictly CONFIDENTIAL and that no person or agency will be identified in any of our findings.

**Program Name:** _____

**Person Interviewed (including title):** _____

**Phone Number:** _____

**CCC Volunteers:** _____

**Date of Interview:** _____

## PART I: PROCEDURE FOR RECEIVING INDEPENDENT LIVING SERVICES

1. How many youth are currently receiving independent living services?

2. What is the age range of youth currently receiving independent living services?

3. How many youth can you accommodate?

4. How does your agency provide independent living services to eligible youth? Please describe the organizational structure of your independent living program (i.e. does your agency have a separate independent living department).

5. At what age are youth eligible for independent living services?

6. Who is eligible for independent living services at your agency?
   - ❑ Youth with goal of independent living
   - ❑ Anyone over age _____
   - ❑ Other, please explain _____

7. Within your agency, who makes the decision to recommend that a youth's goal be changed to independent living?
   - ❑ Agency Caseworker
   - ❑ Youth
   - ❑ Parents
   - ❑ ILP[25] coordinator
   - ❑ Other, please explain _____

[25] ILP: Independent Living Program

8. Is a youth notified of his/her goal change to independent living?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

   8a. If yes, how is a youth notified of this goal change?
   - ❑ By meeting with caseworker
   - ❑ By mail
   - ❑ By phone
   - ❑ Other

9. Once given a goal of independent living, is a contract for services to be delivered made with the youth?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

10. If yes, in general what is the nature of this contract?

11. Once a goal of independent living is set, does the youth participate in setting the terms of the contract?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

12. How does your agency assist youth who fail to demonstrate progress in the development of independent living skills?

13. Please describe the components of your agency's independent living program (including core skills training, groups for youth, obtaining community resources, etc..):

14. For agencies that provide both congregate care and foster boarding homes, is the content different for independent living services provided to youth in congregate care versus a foster boarding home?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

   14a. If yes, how is the content different?

15. Following the setting of a goal to independent living, at what point in time is the progress of each youth reviewed by a caseworker? By a supervisor?

## PART II: SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

### EDUCATION

1. Of the youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997, what proportion were discharged with a high school diploma or GED equivalent?

2. Of the youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997, what proportion were reading at or above grade level?

3. Does your agency have a specialist for providing educational assistance to youth who have a goal of independent living?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

   3a. If yes, does the educational specialist help youth apply to college and/or to complete financial aid applications?
   - ❑ Both
   - ❑ Applying for college
   - ❑ Completing application for financial aid
   - ❑ Neither

### EMPLOYMENT

1. Of the youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997, what proportion had job experience prior to discharge?

| | Percentage |
|---|---|
| ❑ Paid | _____ |
| ❑ Voluntary | _____ |
| ❑ Both | _____ |
| ❑ None | _____ |

2. Does your agency have an employment specialist to work with youth who have a goal of independent living?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

3. Do youth receive employment training from your agency?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

3a. If yes, please describe the kind of employment training offered, including the most intensive level of training and the least intensive level of training:

3b. If yes, does your employment training program provide assistance with any of the following:

| | Yes | No |
|---|---|---|
| How to find a job | _____ | _____ |
| Proper Attire | _____ | _____ |
| Interview skills | _____ | _____ |
| Resume writing | _____ | _____ |
| Working with a supervisor | _____ | _____ |

4. At what age are youth in your independent living program eligible for employment training?

5. Does your agency provide internship opportunities to youth who have a goal of independent living?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

6. Prior to discharging youth who have a goal of independent living, does anyone in your agency assist in finding employment to continue after discharge?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

   6a. If yes, what resources are available to the staff person?
   - ❑ Job listings at your agency
   - ❑ Relationship/linkage with local employers
   - ❑ Newspaper
   - ❑ Other, please explain _____

   6b. If the answer is no to question #6, does your agency refer youth to outside sources for employment training?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

7. Does your agency have any linkages with employers?
   - ❑ Formal linkage agreements
   - ❑ Informal linkages and referral agreements
   - ❑ No linkages
   - ❑ Other, please explain _____

8. Of the youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997, what proportion of youth had jobs upon discharge?

9. Of the youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997, what proportion have since received welfare benefits?

**VOCATIONAL TRAINING**

1. Of the youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997, what proportion of youth were offered vocational training?

2. Does your agency offer vocational training to youth who have a goal of independent living?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

   2a. If yes, please describe the training, including a description of the most intensive training offered and the least intensive training offered:

   2b. If the answer is no to question #2, does your agency refer youth to outside sources for vocational training?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

**FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT**

1. Of the youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997, what proportion had a personal bank account upon discharge?

2. Does your agency provide instruction on money management?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

2a. If yes, please describe the instruction offered, including description of the most intensive instruction offered and the least intensive:

3. Are youth in with a goal of independent living encouraged to establish a personal savings plan (i.e. maintain a personal savings account)?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

**FINDING AN APARTMENT**

1. Of the youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997, what proportion had permanent housing?

2. Of the youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997, what proportion have since entered the shelter system?

3. Does your agency have a housing specialist for youth who have a goal of independent living?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

   3a. If no, how is housing secured for youth who have a goal of independent living?

4. Does your agency provide assistance or training in locating and leasing an apartment?
   - ❑ Assistance
   - ❑ Training
   - ❑ Both
   - ❑ Neither

   4a. If your agency provides training, please describe the training offered, including a description of the most intensive training and the least intensive training:

5. Does your agency provide any financial assistance to youth for the purpose of securing an apartment?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

   5a. If yes, what is the source of this financial assistance?
   - ❑ Your agency
   - ❑ ACS Housing subsidy
   - ❑ ACS Discharge grant
   - ❑ Other, please explain _____

6. Of the youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997, what proportion received a discharge grant from ACS?

7. What was the range of grant amounts awarded?

8. Of youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997, what proportion received a housing subsidy from ACS?

9. What was the range of subsidy amounts awarded?

10. Of the youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997, what proportion were discharged to

| | Percentage |
|---|---|
| ❑ Permanent Housing | _____ |
| ❑ Shelter | _____ |
| ❑ Hotel | _____ |
| ❑ Other, please explain | _____ |

**PART III: 12 ONE-HOUR INSTRUCTIONAL CLASSES:**

The following series of questions concern the required 12 one-hour instructional classes outlined in the ACS independent living regulations.

1. How often are these instructional classes held?
   - ❑ Daily
   - ❑ Weekly
   - ❑ Monthly
   - ❑ Bi-monthly
   - ❑ Other

2. When are these classes held?
   - ❑ After-school 3-6 p.m.
   - ❑ Evening hours 6-9 p.m.
   - ❑ Weekends (Saturday and Sunday)
   - ❑ Other, please explain _____

3. If youth have school or work conflicts with an independent living class, are you able to offer the class at an alternate time?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

4. How are youth notified of classes?
   - ❑ Phone
   - ❑ Mail
   - ❑ Meeting with caseworker
   - ❑ Other, please explain _____

5. Is attendance at these classes mandatory?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

6. Is attendance kept?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

7. Do you have a record of the number of youth who attended these classes in 1997 and the number of hours of attendance?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

   ****If yes, can we please have a copy of these records without any identifying information.**

8. Is there outreach to engage youth in these programs?
   - ❑ Yes, please explain
   - ❑ No

9. Is a curriculum used at these classes?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

   ****If yes, may we please have a copy of the curriculum**

   9a. If yes, who sets the curriculum?
   - ❑ Your agency
   - ❑ ACS
   - ❑ Other

10. Who teaches the classes?
    - ❑ Your agency: please specify staff titles
    - ❑ ACS
    - ❑ Other, please explain

****May we please have a copy of your agency's schedule/calendar of classes.**

11. Generally, how many youth are in these classes?

12. What proportion of youth who have a goal of independent living regularly attend the instructional classes?

**PART IV: FOSTER PARENTS**

The next series of questions pertains to foster parents of youth who enter foster care as adolescents.

1. Do you specifically recruit foster parents for adolescents?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

2. During the recruitment process, are foster parents asked whether they would like to live with adolescents?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

3. Are certain foster parents designated to accept youth with a goal of independent living?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

4. Is there special training given to foster parents who live with youth in the independent living program?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

   4a. If yes, who gives the training?
   - ❑ Your agency
   - ❑ Outside organization: please name _____

   4b. If yes, what does the training consist of?

5. Does your agency provide support groups for foster parents with youth in the independent living program?
   - ❑ Yes, please describe _____
   - ❑ No

**PART V: CASEWORKERS**

1. Is there a special group of caseworkers assigned to youth with a goal of independent living?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

   1a. If yes, is there special training for these caseworkers?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

2. What are their caseloads?

**PART VI: DISCHARGE**

1. Prior to making a request to ACS, how does your agency make a decision to recommend the discharge of a youth who has a goal of independent living?

2. Do all youth who are being prepared for discharge to independent living participate in the development of their discharge plans?
   - ❑ All
   - ❑ Most
   - ❑ Some
   - ❑ None

3. In most instances, how far in advance of discharge is the discharge date set?
   - ❑ Month
   - ❑ Two months
   - ❑ Six months
   - ❑ Other, please explain _____

4. What are the necessary steps prior to discharge?

5. Is a source of income a requirement for discharge?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

6. Of the youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997, what proportion were discharged who were:

| | Percentage |
|---|---|
| ❑ Earning enough money to pay for their own expenses | _____ |
| ❑ Receiving welfare | _____ |
| ❑ Receiving SSI | _____ |
| ❑ Receiving SSD | _____ |
| ❑ Receiving Other | _____ |

7. Of the youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997, what proportion were linked to a primary physician upon discharge?

8. Of the youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997, what proportion were discharged with health insurance?

| | Percentage |
|---|---|
| ❑ Medicaid | _____ |
| ❑ CHP | _____ |
| ❑ Other, please explain _____ | |

**PART VII: FOLLOW-UP AFTER DISCHARGE**

1. Is there a trial discharge period for youth discharged to independent living?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

   1a. If yes, how long is the trial discharge period?

2. Of the youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997, how many care back into care during the trial discharge period?

3. Are there any follow-up services after final discharge?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

4. If yes, please describe the follow-up:

5. Describe any other form of assistance that may be provided by your agency to a youth who has been discharged to independent living?

| | Yes | No |
|---|---|---|
| Ongoing instructional classes | _____ | _____ |
| Financial assistance for clothing | _____ | _____ |
| Financial assistance for transportation | _____ | _____ |
| Other, please describe | _____ | _____ |

6. Can youth who were discharged to independent living still access foster care services from your agency?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

7. Does your agency have funding for post-discharge services, excluding any money from ACS?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

   7a. If yes, what is the source of the funding?
   - ❑ Private donations
   - ❑ Grant from foundation
   - ❑ Other government funding, please include source
   - ❑ Other, please explain _____

8. What was the average annual amount of funds that were available for post-discharge services in 1997, excluding any funding from ACS?

9. Does your agency use other sources of funding to supplement your independent living services?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

   9a. If yes, please describe the source of that funding
   - ❑ Private donations
   - ❑ Grant from foundation
   - ❑ Other government funding, please list source
   - ❑ Other, please explain _____

10. What was the average amount of funds used to supplement your independent living services in 1997, excluding funding from ACS?

11. In your experience, do you believe that youth who are discharged to independent living have developed a network of support in the community where they live?
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

12. Does your agency provide reunions for youth who were discharged to independent living?

| | Yes | No |
|---|---|---|
| With your agency | _____ | _____ |
| With other youth in the program | _____ | _____ |
| With foster parents | _____ | _____ |

Other, please explain _____

13. Of the youth who were discharged to independent living in 1997, what proportion have since:

| | Percentage |
|---|---|
| ❑ Finished high school | _____ |
| ❑ Attended college | _____ |
| ❑ Attended technical school | _____ |
| ❑ Joined the armed forces | _____ |
| ❑ Found employment | _____ |

❑ Other, please explain _____

14. Do you collect any data on youth who have been discharged to independent living?

❑ Yes
❑ No

14a. If yes, please describe the data that you gathered:

15. Please tell us anything else about your independent living program that you feel our questions did not cover:

**The interview is now over. Thank you very much for being so generous with your time.**

## Notes

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